



Racheltjie de Beer

1831–1843

Rachel de Beer (1831–1843) (known by the diminutive form, *Racheltjie*) is an Afrikaner heroine, who gave her life in order to save that of her brother. Allegedly, the daughter of George Stephanus de Beer and Martha Maria de Beer.

The Story of Racheltjie de Beer

Her name was Racheltjie de Beer. It was the winter of 1843 and the De Beer family was traveling on the “Groot Trek” from the Free State to the then Southeast Transvaal in search of land.

One night, the family stayed over in the field. The cattle were brought in at the end of the day, but one calf was missing. The children were very attached to this calf and call him Frikkie. Everybody who could was called in to search for missing Frikkie.

Among the seekers was Rachel and her little brother. The children wandered around, looking for Frikkie, but their beloved animal friend was nowhere to be found. In their youthful irresponsibility, they got separated from the search party. When dusk descended, snow started to fall and Rachel and her brother realized they are lost.



Rachel was wise enough to know that they had to keep walking, if they stopped they would die. Ultimately, they could not go any further in the terrible cold.



Rachel had a plan. She had to save at least her brother's life, even if she had to lay down her own. She found an anthill that was hollowed out by an aardvark. She took off all her clothes and put it on her brother. "Climb into the anthill", she told him. When he did, she lay down in front of the cavity to protect him from the cold with her naked body.

That's how the grownups found the children the following morning: Rachel with her fragile body frozen and lifeless in front of the mouth of the hollowed-out anthill in the field. Her brother (6 years old at the time) was stiff from the cold, but he survived.

Rachel de Beer, a defenseless girl of twelve, gave her own life to save the life of her brother.

Genealogical perspective

In the very comprehensive genealogical work "The De Beer Family – Three centuries in South Africa" several pages are devoted to the Rachel de Beer story, looking at all the possibilities from the available genealogical data.

It turns out that there was a De Beer family that fits the names and ages as mentioned in the original story quite closely. However, they lived 60 years later. If the incident happened in 1903 instead of 1843, this family would fit the facts quite nicely. It would also better explain why there is no mention of this story before the early 1900s.

By the third edition of the work more information came to light to also eliminate this last possible scenario. The Rachel de Beer in this instance was confirmed to have lived well into adulthood.

Historicity debate

In October 2012, two Afrikaans journalists published their findings that the story of Racheltjie de Beer bears many similarities to that of the American heroine Hazel Miner. They wrote about it in three Afrikaans newspapers *Die Burger*, *Beeld*, and *Volksblad*. What is more, the very first story about Rachel appeared in print only about a month or three after the *North Dakota Children's Home Finder* gave Hazel Miner's story the wider publicity that it had deserved. The Afrikaans journalists also posted a more elaborate paper on their findings

to the web under the title *Die laaste rits bewyse: Racheltjie is bloot 'n afspieëling van Hazel Miner* (*The last series of evidences: Little Rachel is merely a mirror image of Hazel Miner*)

The Story of Hazel Miner

The Miner children lose their way

On March 15, 1920, the first day of the blizzard, the school dismissed its students early to enable them to go home before the storm arrived. Many of the students, like the Miner children, were used to driving to and from school with a horse and buggy, but the school teacher had a rule that no child was permitted to drive home in bad weather without permission from a parent. William Miner, who was worried about the blizzard conditions, rode the two miles to the school on a saddle horse to escort his children home.



At about one o'clock in the afternoon, at the school, Miner hitched the children's horse, "Old Maude," to their light sleigh and told Hazel to wait while he went back to the school's barn to get his horse. Hazel wasn't strong enough to keep the horse from heading out into the blizzard before her father came back from the barn. William Miner searched for his children, but soon realized they must have gotten lost and went home to organize a search party. Via telephone, farm families from the surrounding countryside summoned men to join the search for the missing Miner children.

Even though she was familiar with the road, Hazel quickly became disoriented due to the blinding, blowing white snow, which made it impossible to see more than a few feet in front of her. She was dressed in warm coat, hat, gloves and sturdy, one-buckle overshoes, but the clothing was insufficient protection against the wind and freezing temperatures, and her hands and feet became numb in the cold. When the sleigh hit a coulee, Hazel slid from the sleigh into waist-deep, mushy snow. She said, "Oh, my! I am wet clear to the waist and my shoes are full of water," her brother recalled later. Her prolonged exposure virtually guaranteed eventual severe hypothermia.

The horse's harness slipped and Hazel had to readjust it. She led the horse forward through the blizzard, but found she had lost sight of the road. There were few landmarks on the prairie to guide the children.

Shelter of last resort

The children continued traveling and growing more tired and cold. Then the sleigh again hit an obstruction and tipped over, throwing Hazel over the dashboard into the snow. Hazel, Emmet, and Myrdith tried to push the sleigh upright, but were not strong enough to lift it, even with all three pushing at once. Using the overturned sleigh as a shelter, Hazel spread two blankets, told Emmet and Myrdith to lie down, and placed a third blanket atop them.

The children tried to keep moving to stay warm. Hazel huddled beside her brother and sister and used her body heat to warm them. She told them stories to keep them awake. The children sang all four verses of "America the Beautiful," a song they had sung during opening exercises at the country school that morning, and repeated the Lord's Prayer. Hazel advised her siblings, "Remember, you mustn't go to sleep — even if I do. Promise me you won't, no matter how sleepy you get. Keep each other awake! Promise?" Her brother and sister promised.

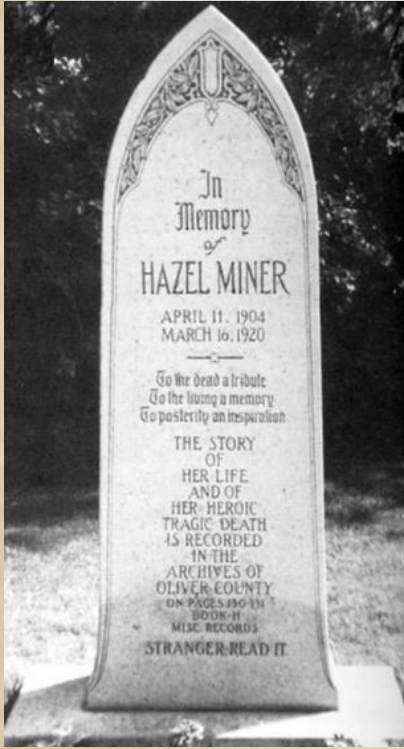
Throughout the night, the children could hear a dog barking somewhere nearby, but no one came to their aid. As the night wore on, Hazel talked less and less, until she finally became silent.

Her brother Emmet later recalled the blizzard for an article in the March 15, 1963 issue of *The Bismarck (N.D.) Tribune*:

The robe kept blowing down and Hazel kept pulling it up until she got so she couldn't put it up any more. Then she covered us up with the robe and lay down on top of it. I told Hazel to get under the covers too, but she said she had to keep us children warm, and she wouldn't do it ... I tried to get out to put the cover over Hazel, but I could not move because she was lying on the cover. The snow would get in around our feet, we couldn't move them, then Hazel would break the crust for us. After awhile she could not break the crust anymore, she just lay still and groaned. I thought she must be dead, then I kept talking to Myrdith so she wouldn't go to sleep.

Search and rescue

A search party of more than thirty men looked for the children throughout the afternoon and evening. They had to give up when it grew dark, but set out again the next morning. When they finally found the children, it was two o'clock in the afternoon on March 16, twenty-five hours since the children had first set out from the school house. The overturned sleigh, with the horse still hitched up to it, was resting in a coulee two miles south of the school. "With breathless haste we harried to the rig and will never forget the sight that met our eyes," one of the men reported. The searchers found the rigid Hazel lying over her siblings, covering them with her body. Her coat, which she had unbuttoned, was spread over the bodies of the two younger children and her arms were stretched out over them. Beneath her, still alive, were Emmet and Myrdith. "Maude," the old horse, was standing beside the overturned sled, also still alive. If the horse had moved, the three children would have been tipped into the snow.



They took the three children to the home of William Starck, a neighbour, for immediate care. Starck's daughter, Anna Starck Benjamin, who was 4½ years old at the time, remembered

"the sound of Hazel's outstretched arms as they brushed against the furniture as they brought her into the house, and took her into my parents' bedroom. The crackling sound as that of frozen laundry brought in off the clothes line in winter. Then I remember the crying, so much crying. They worked over Hazel for hours, trying to revive her, but without success. Hazel's mother, Blanche, was brought to the Starck house after the searchers found the children and sat in a chair, rocking back and forth, while they tended to the three children. Throughout the night when the children were missing, she had been kept company by neighbours. At one point, she drifted off to sleep, and said later that her daughter had come to her in a dream. In the dream, Hazel said, "I was cold, Mama, but I'm not anymore."

At Hazel's funeral, the minister preached a sermon on the Christian Bible verse John 15:13: "Greater love hath no man that he lay down his life for his friend," and said, "Here and there are occasionally people who by their acts and lives endeavour to imitate Him."

Hazel was one of 34 people who died during the blizzard, which lasted three days.

Conclusion

The facts are: deaths were not always very well documented during certain timeframes in South African history. Neither during the "Groot Trek" in the 1840's nor during the Boer-War in the 1900's. Thus there is no evidence to either prove or disprove the existence of Rachel de Beer. The evidence that we do have suggests the story to be fiction. BUT.... Fiction or not, Rachel de Beer is entrenched in the culture, which is evident by the number of streets and schools named after her.

The story might be fiction but it is a story that will never die.